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At the risk of trying the patience of loyal readers (not to mention the editor's!) I have to revisit a topic that I covered in previous pieces (*The free flow of knowledge*, 23 November 2022

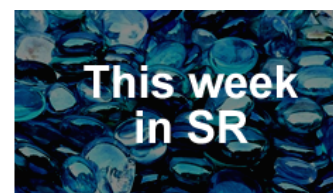
(<https://www.scottishreview.net/ManfredilaManna638a.html>), and *Conspiracy 'theories' are fables at best*, 30 November 2022

(<https://www.scottishreview.net/ManfredilaManna639a.html>)), but if even the *Financial Times* (*Study reveals scale of 'science scam' in academic publishing*, 11 May 2023) raises a red flag about the integrity of science, perhaps it is worth considering again some of the pitfalls of academic publishing.

The FT's article reports the findings of a study led by the head of the Institute of Medical Psychology at the University of Magdeburg (Germany) which suggests that 20% of articles in biomedicine are 'fake'. This percentage amounts to 300,000 fake articles *per year*. What defines a 'fake' article? The study by-passes this crucial question and takes an indirect route, classifying articles by the number of 'red flags', such as the use of personal email addresses (rather than university ones) or affiliations to institutions other than universities.

The methodology of the German study is rather unsatisfactory and it may come as no surprise (and much irony) that the paper itself has not been peer-reviewed yet. What the study does highlight, though, is the existence of veritable 'paper mills' producing fabricated research ready for submission and eventual publication in 'peer reviewed' journals. Most of these fakes end up in soi-disant peer-reviewed journals, which are nothing of the sort, being a scam to extract money from desperate authors (mainly from non-First World countries) who literally have to publish or perish.

The dangers of fabricated research, especially in biomedical fields, are too



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obvious to need explaining and they are going to be more difficult to avoid in the very near future. The reason is AI (isn't it always?). One of the safeguards against fake articles is that being produced in countries whose mother tongue is not the *lingua franca* of science (English), up to recently their level of English fluency has been very low and hence easy to spot. Not so now, when AI-aided software can turn a poorly written piece into a very polished article, respecting all the customs and quirks of academic writing. Add AI-enabled searches of vast quantities of data and images, and you have all the ingredients for a successful quasi-criminal industry which, according to the FT, has an annual turnover of \$3bn-\$4bn (yes, billions!).

According to the German study, over 50% of fake biomedical articles are produced in China and one has to wonder how in such a closely monitored society the authorities acquiesce to activities that not only are not legal, but more importantly, have a toxic and corrosive effect on the very integrity of science.

Is there a solution that would protect and defend the whole process of peer review? In theory, there is, but in practice it is most unlikely to be ever implemented. The solution is simply to remove peer review from the grasp of *all* publishers of academic articles and to place it where it naturally belongs, i.e., in academia. This apparently innocuous and sensible step, of course, would completely disrupt the current business model of both 'respectable' publishers and 'scam' publishers (sometimes referred to as 'predatory'). Having tried for over two decades to promote open access to properly reviewed scientific and scholarly articles, I personally see no prospects whatsoever for meaningful reform.

As a footnote, readers may be interested to know that after months of intense negotiations, all UK universities have very recently finalised an UK-wide agreement with Elsevier – the largest and most profitable commercial publisher of academic journals. Elsevier's journals are astronomically expensive (this is why the company's profits, in a risk-free industry, average at £2bn a year) but some university librarians trumpet as a victory for faculty, students, and indeed science, that for the next three years Elsevier has graciously agreed to keep its *increase* in prices to 1% for year one and to 2% for years two and three. With allies like these...

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